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AUTHOR	Page, Douglas B.
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ABSTRACT

This document provides an overview of the distribution of minority groups across the economic class structure, examines the concept of a separate underclass, and assesses the potential of strategies based on residential and job mobility for improving the prospects of each of the different classes. A racial comparison of all urban households on the basis of income yields the following findings: (1) 4 percent of Black households and 14 percent of White households comprise the upper class; (2) 23.6 percent of Black households, 27.6 percent of Hispanic households, and 41.9 percent of White households are at least middle class; (3) 20 percent of all groups comprise the working class; (4) 15.3 percent of Black households and 17.5 percent of Hispanic households comprise the low income class; and (5) 41.3 percent of Black households and 33.4 percent of Hispanic households comprise the very low income class. The underclass is a newly emerged group that can be viewed as a subset of the low and very low income groups, whose members have developed problems beyond poverty and lack of opportunity, and are geographically concentrated in urban innercities. Policies that employ residential mobility to overcome the limitations of innercity residence focus on either improving the relative advantages available in the inner-city, or improving the access of innercity residents to advantages available in the suburbs. However, these solutions, which merely involve movement within the current geography, cannot assure employment success. Two tables of statistical data and a chart illustrating the theories of the underclass are included. A list of 19 references is appended. (FMW)

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Douglas B. Page

THE URBAN INSTITUTE

Project Report

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SPATIAL MOBILITY, MINORITY CLASS STRUCTURE, AND THE URBAN UNDERCLASS

Douglas B. Page*

March 1988

During the 1980s, the media--and to a lesser extent academics--have tended to focus on two segments of the minority population in the United States: the 'new' black middle class and the urban 'underclass'. Certainly this is an understandable focus since these groups represent the most visible (in the former case) and troubling (in the latter) segments of the minority population. But for the same reasons it is also an unfortunate focus; the bulk of minority households fall somewhere in between. This majority between the extremes includes stable working class households, the working poor, and many below the poverty line. The more salient realities of minorities in the U.S.--for instance that black median family income is still only 58% that of whites and unemployment more than 2.4 times as high (Glasgow 1987)--are often overlooked, perhaps because persistence is the antithesis of newsworthiness. Several black scholars have been at the forefront both of identifying the emergence of an underclass and of showing how it is linked to the larger minority experience.

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* Research Associate, The Urban Institute.

This paper will provide an overview of the distibution of minorities across the entire economic class structure, examine the concept of a separate underclass, and assess the potential of a strategy designed to promote residential and job mobility for improving the lots of each of the different classes.

Socioeconomic Class Among Minorities

The most straightforward, and arguably most objective, way to measure as slippery a notion as class is by household income. Although the dollar cutoffs are bound to be arbitrary, they do relate to standard of living and can be adjusted over time. Other writers, such as Frazier (1962) and Landry (1987), have defined classes as composed of certain occupational categories. But as Hill (1986) points out, these definitions risk codifying unproven assumptions about the status and remuneration associated with internally diverse job labels (sales, service, clerical, technician, etc.). Furthermore they mask important structural changes in an economy; a growth over time in the number of people performing 'middle class' jobs likely represents an economic maturation from primary and secondary sector jobs to increased activity in the tertiary sector and may not represent any absolute or relative gains for the workers.

Moreover, I believe it is necessary to compare households of all races to the same cutoffs. Not to do so is to perpetuate a racially stratified society with separate and unequal class structures.

In Exhibit 1, I employ the income classes developed by Turner and Page (1987, in a companion paper for this project) and based on the HUD definition of income ranges. The middle/high class has the further advantage of corresponding to Hill's (1986) definition of the "economically middle class": those with 1983 incomes above $25,000.

EXHIBIT 1: THE METROPOLITAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME CLASS STRUCTURE

A. Definition of Income Classes

	HUD Definition	Income Range
Very low income	< 50% of local median	$0 - $10,000
Low income	50 - 80% of local median	$10,000 - $15,000
Moderate income	80 - 120% of local median	$15,000 - $25,000
Middle/high income	> 120% of local median	$25,000 +

B. Income Distribution of Metropolitan Households by Racial Group

	Very Low	Low	Moderate	Middle/High
All households	23.9%	13.3%	20.9%	41.9%
Black households	41.5	15.3	19.3	23.6
Hispanic households	33.4	17.5	21.5	27.6

Note: Rows may not add to 100% because of rounding.
Source: Urban Institute tabulations of published 1983 AHS data.

Thus, 23.6% of black metropolitan households are at least middle class. Hispanic metropolitan households fare slightly better at 27.6%. (Note: I have included hispanic data where available, but much of the literature on the underclass focuses exclusively on blacks.) These figures compare unfavorably with 41.9% of all metropolitan households and an even higher percentage of white households. Absent discrimination, it is assumed that households with incomes above $25,000 are secure and sufficiently mobile with respect to job and housing opportunities so as not to require specially designed government programs (beyond those that already subsidize housing for the middle and upper classes). Hill (1986) does an excellent job of examining the veracity of many reports and assumptions about the black middle class, touching on educational attainment, job status, double income families, residence, and social relations.

The absence of differentiation in the minority class structure above the level of the middle class is attributable to the scope of this housing mobility project and the relative absence of a "black corporate upper class" (Landry 1987, p.224). For purposes of comparison, Hill reports that 4% of black families had incomes of over $50,000 in 1983, as compared with 14% of white families (Hill 1986, p.64). It seems that a new black upper class will have to emerge in coming decades before the country can feel comfortable that it has attained equality.

The working class is operationally defined as those households with moderate incomes of $15,000 - $25,000 in 1983. As Exhibit 2 shows, this class includes roughly 20% of black, hispanic, and all metropolitan households. These are stable, self-sufficient households with one or two members employed, whose opportunities (for homeownership, higher education, etc.) are nonetheless limited by income.

The above designation 'working class' is not meant to exclude the working poor. Those with incomes from $10,000 - $15,000 are designated low income, though many of their ranks are employed. In 1983, 15.3% of black and 17.5% of hispanic metropolitan households had low incomes. Clearly, the opportunities and mobility of this class are more severely constrained by income, and their margin of security for difficult times is small.

Finally, the very low income, those with incomes below $10,000 in 1983, form 23.9% of all metropolitan households, but 33.4% of hispanic and a full 41.3% of black metropolitan households. Again, the $10,000 cutoff has the advantage of corresponding to the official poverty line of $10,178 for a family of four in 1983.

To what extent has the class composition of minority households been changing in the last two decades? Hill (1986) has charted the change in black and white economic class composition in constant 1983 dollars since 1969 (see Exhibit 2). He finds that the proportion of black households in the very low income category has increased by 27% since 1969. The proportion that is low income had a 12% decline, and the moderate income working class suffered a 21% drop. Finally, the black middle class, while growing through the 1970s, contained the same proportion of black households in 1983 as it did in 1969.

EXHIBIT 2:
Change in Income Distribution by Racial Group

	1969		1978		1983	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
Very low	29%	11%	30%	11%	37%	13%
Low	17	10	15	10	15	11
Moderate	28	25	23	22	22	24
Middle/high	27	54	31	57	27	52

Notes: Income ranges in constant 1983 dollars. Figures include all (metropolitan and non-metropolitan) U.S. households. Columns may not add to 100% because of rounding.
Source: Hill's (1986) tabulations of CPS data.

While the direction of change is essentially the same for white households, reflecting the effect of macroeconomic forces on both groups, a closer comparison with the income trends for white households is particularly revealing. Though subject to the same broad economic forces, blacks suffered greater setbacks than whites, falling further. This suggests not so much that the rungs get stronger as you climb the economic ladder, but that minorities are still climbing on a separate and weaker ladder. Even within the same income class as whites, minorities are less secure in their positions and closer to the margin. Witness the much sharper decline in the black, moderate income working class and the plunge of these people not simply into the next class (low income) but into poverty (very low).

I have left discussion of the underclass for last, since most agree that it cannot be delimited by income alone. Though some authors would dissent, the underclass can still be seen as a subset of the poor (low and very low income). The dissent stems from a wish to include in the underclass individuals who may make a considerable income from criminal activity or prositutution; nonetheless, I consider this income as providing an illegitimate, risky, and probably temporary respite from poverty and unlikely to be reported on income surveys.

What is the underclass?

It has been said that everyone knows what the underclass is, it's just that there is little agreement. Most people do have a concept of the underclass, but would be hard-pressed to define it. And though the term was used by Myrdal as far back as 1962 and has reemerged in recent years, there exists little consensus among experts as to appropriate operational or conceptual definitions.

Many of the various descriptions of the underclass put forward so far tend either to lump certain known groups together or to use one or more, more or less measurable characteristics as identifying criteria. Groups commonly included in approaches of the first type are unwed mothers, high school dropouts, unskilled day workers, homeless persons, drug addicts, drug dealers, prostitutes, habitual criminals, street hustlers, long-term AFDC recipients, long-term unemployed persons, deinstitutionalized mental patients, and severe alcoholics. The conceptions of different authors pull together these groups with varying

degrees of selectivity and often overlay them with the belief that the underclass is primarily a problem of inner city neighborhoods and/or of minorities.

Such definitions have been criticized for amalgamating groups that are too disparate. In what sense do the passive poor on the one hand and criminals on the other constitute a cohesive class? Can the causes of and solutions to the plights of these groups be similar, and if not, in what sense is it useful to refer to them collectively as the underclass?

The second definitional approach avoids this coherence problem by instead identifying common, measurable characteristics or behaviors which alone or in combination place an individual in the underclass. Characteristics may include extreme poverty, long-term poverty, lack of job skills or employment history, social and spatial isolation, and welfare dependency. Indicators of anti-social or dysfunctional behavior typically include parenting out of wedlock, lack of responsibility towards family or community, spurning what resources or opportunities are available (educational, institutional, vocational), criminal activity, apparent lack of motivation, failure to plan or prepare for the future, etc.

While it is outside of the scope of this paper to review all the specific definitions and descriptions that have been used (see Ricketts & Sawhill 1986; Wilson 1987) or to enter the debate, it is useful to stand back and survey these conceptions of the underclass for the common themes, explicit and implicit, that tell us what people think the underclass is and why it has become a distinct and increasingly debated entity.

Above all, the term 'underclass' embodies people's perceptions and experience--including fear, prejudice, compassion, and misunderstanding, as well as objective observation--that there indeed exists a unique group that requires a new name. (Statistical measures tend to follow, reenforcing the perception and helping to forge a working definition.) Most agree that extreme poverty alone is not a sufficient condition to place someone in the underclass, though it certainly puts him or her in a more vulnerable position. Extreme poverty has always been present, but the underclass is seen as a recent and distinct phenomenon. Whereas poverty is a quantitative distinction along the income spectrum, if there is a common thread to definitions of an underclass it is some notion of a distinction in kind from the American "mainstream".

This perceived distinctness is conspicuously manifested in the words used by various authors to describe and define members of the underclass: dysfunctional, unwed, uneducated, disabled, unmotivated, malnourished, unemployed, unemployable, immobile, homeless, hopeless, unreachable, and anti-social--all somehow profoundly 'un-American' in their qualitative separateness from, and semantic opposition to, the idealized mainstream (educated, employed, upwardly mobile, etc.). Not simply on the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder (even of a separate minority ladder), the underclass is somehow not on the ladder at all. Glasgow believes that "it is labor force disconnection and its consequential economic impoverishment that distinguishes this class segmentation" (1987, p.141). Likewise Landry refers to the underclass as a "fallout group" comprised of "those who have failed to get a foothold even at the level of the unskilled working class" (1987, p.13). Ricketts notes that the success

of the new black middle class combined with the perceived shortcomings of Affirmative Action and anti-poverty programs contributed to the impression that those left behind were beyond the reach of the available mechanisms of social mobility and thus formed a true underclass. And Kornblum argues that the underclass refers to those "who are clearly 'below' the poor...who are outside both the class system of capitalist production and any local community" (1984, p.299).

Thus, the underclass concerns us not just because of the compassion it arouses in us, not just because of the social problems and threats it seems to pose on society, but also because it challenges our faith in the ability of government and/or a strong economy to improve the lot of all members of society and ultimately in the American fantasy of a nation that offers independence, opportunity, and mobility for all. The differences between the emerging liberal and conservative explanations of and solutions to the underclass are especially interesting when seen in context as responses to this challenge (see Wilson 1987, Chs. 1, 7).

Experience also leads most authors to the conviction that the underclass is a phenomenon of the large (typically Northeastern and North Central) central cities and is even further concentrated in a small number of specific, 'bad' neighborhoods. Some build this requirement into their definition of the underclass; some measure only people in census tracts which meet certain cutoff criteria; wheareas others use this expectation of concentration and urban-ness to test the accuracy of their operational definitions. In a way that almost no other group is, the underclass is defined as concentrated in certain places, and this

definition reflects an a priori conception of the group almost apart from their specific personal characteristics or behavior.

Indeed the fact that so many of the definitions of the underclass are so explicitly geographical leads one to speculate that (beyond the constraints of the types of statistics available) the perception we are trying to express with this term 'underclass' is based at least as much on our experience of alien inner-city places as on a solid experience of the specific people who inhabit (and presumably created) these places. Certainly the elusiveness of consensus not only on the specific characteristics of the people but even on the broad types of people to label as underclass is consistent with this speculation. I do not mean to suggest that the underclass does not exist or exists only in our minds, but rather to offer some insights into the process of perceiving, identifying, and defining this new social entity.

The underclass is thus a newly-emerged, non-economic (or not entirely economic) class whose members have developed problems beyond, though not unrelated to, current poverty and lack of opportunity. Against a background of poverty, the most conspicuous characteristics of the underclass (which prompted its identification and aroused our concern for its members) are: disconnectedness, lack of mobility/potential, and possible inter-generational transfer of poverty; the posing of social problems or threats; and geographic concentration. The exclusion of the elderly from most definitions is revealing: elderly persons may be desperately poor and in undesirable circumstances, but their expected mobility/potential is now low, they pose little threat, and they tend to be relatively inconspicuously distributed.

Measuring the Underclass

Not surprisingly, measures of the size of the underclass vary widely, from as few as 250,000 people to more than 10 million or roughly 30% of the population below the poverty line. Thus, even with blacks almost three times more likely to be in poverty than whites, an upper bound estimate of the proportion of blacks who might be considered underclass is still under 15%, scant evidence for Lemann's (1987) reported bifurcation of black America between the middle and underclasses.

Despite the literature's emphasis on qualitative and behavioral distinctions, most of the measures of the size of the underclass are based on some subset of the poverty population selected by locational concentration or duration of poverty. This is largely due of course to the type of data most readily available. Each measure does capture something meaningful, if not precisely the underclass. A new measure proposed by Ricketts and Sawhill (1986) uses other Census data to try to capture the co-incidence of dysfunctional behaviors in certain census tracts.

Still, we have seen that the underclass embodies a statement about its members beyond the concentration and duration of poverty. Danziger and Gottschalk (1987) among others have documented the concentration of the poor in urban areas over recent decades; and the duration of spells of poverty may or may not have been increasing. But the concentration and duration of poverty are still only hypothesized incubators of

underclass characteristics. The size of the underclass remains difficult to measure directly, and the diversity of characteristics identified as underclass may make better definitions and measures both impossible to achieve and ultimately not very useful. Sawhill, who has studied and thought about the underclass extensively, concludes her latest discussion by writing: "Any definition, like the definition of poverty itself, is inherently arbitrary, and it is perhaps best to think in terms of a continuum of disadvantages defined in terms of income, behavior, and neighborhood environment" (1988, p.230).

Theories of the Underclass

I find that theories of the underclass are best analyzed by identifying four distinct aspects of the underclass concept that require explanation:

- Cause—how the disadvantaged conditions of the underclass were created;
- Perpetuation—how the underclass is actively entrapped and denied escape or mobility;
- Makeup—why minorities are disproportionately represented in the underclass; and,
- Location—why the underclass is concentrated in central cities.

No one theory purports to explain all of these issues, and no issue has only one, unrivaled explanation.

For each issue, explanation requires a causal mechanism in addition to an observed or hypothesized correlation. For example, we must be careful not to infer, as some have done, from the empirical observation

of an underclass concentrated in the central city to a theoretical or causal association. The problems of the underclass are manifest spatially and exhibit discernible geographic patterns (as do all types of human activity), but there must be a causal mechanism to argue that certain neighborhoods are culpable. Likewise, concentration does not necessarily imply entrapment, and the disproportionate representation of blacks and hispanics in the underclass does not necessarily indicate persistent racism.

Many of the theoretical mechanisms ultimately involve labor market outcomes, since, as we have seen, labor force non-participation is crucial in setting the underclass apart. In theory, if the members of the underclass could or would work, or if they were better prepared to work in mainstream jobs, they would escape the underclass since their income would presumably be higher and more reliable and their behavior more responsible and functional.

Spatial mobility--the focus of this project--has a potential role in explaining both the lack of opportunity to work (the "could") and the seemingly poor preparation for the working world. I have labeled these handicapping roles for space as the labor 'accessibility' and 'reproduction' arguments respectively. The accessibility argument refers to the spatial separation of available jobs and housing appropriately matched by income and affordability. Accessibility can pose a problem through the sheer physical distance between work and residence, the difficulty of commuting, or the information and search costs of obtaining a job.

The reproduction of labor refers essentially to the process of nurturing and training the next generation of workers. Whereas it is a somewhat cynical, overly economic conception of children being prepared to serve as future inputs to production, it is nonetheless a useful conception, including education, moral development, nutrition, health care, etc.. Society (including the businesses that will ultimately employ labor) entrusts the reproduction of labor largely to parents and the state (acting primarily through schools). And these functions are supported financially by taxes on businesses, personal income taxes, and wages and benefits that go toward dependent care. Re-production is perhaps a fortuitous term since even in the U.S. parents have tended to produce offspring that turn out not too dissimilar from themselves; this is perhaps a roundabout truism about the class system (inter-generational transfer). Parental income, education, class, and environment matter. What is more, the term reproduction captures the remarkable feat that an approximate and perpetual, if somewhat dated, regeneration of society's labor needs (for workers of various educational and skill levels) is achieved almost automatically.

Geography is also an important factor in the reproduction of labor, influencing individuals through the type and quality of education, socialization in the neighborhood environment, and the nature of role models and expectations (see Harvey 1975). A certain internally homogenous area may effectively reproduce labor in a certain segment of the labor market, typically for a corresponding type of employer already located in or drawing labor from the area. Public spending and jurisdictional fragmentation often reenforce the process, in a manner

strikingly similar to the dispassionate efficiency of jurisdictional consumption possibilities hypothesized by Tiebout (1956). Thus the reproduction argument contends that the inner-city residential environment contributes to the now inadequate preparation of individuals of the underclass for successful and remunerative participation in the labor force. In summary, space can be implicated in theories of the underclass as a handicap in both labor reproduction and accessibility.

For this paper, I have attempted painstakingly to identify and categorize the distinct arguments that have been put forward in the growing literature struggling to explain the underclass. I identify what about the underclass each argument purports to explain (the cause, perpetuation, makeup, or location), the mechanisms of impact, whether the argument implicates space as an important handicap, and finally some of the policy treatments or solutions that the argument might imply. This analysis is presented in Exhibit 3 in a form that I hope is both clear and useful.

While some explanations complement each other, others imply a deemphasis on a competing explanation. Indeed, it may be observed that some arguments have perhaps been advanced less on their own merits than on the merit of not invoking other arguments that are for some reason less palatable in the particular intellectual or ideological climate. Indictments of the American socioeconomic system and mainstream society can be avoided by blaming misguided government programs and/or the culture and motivations of the poor. The retreat from any discussion of cultural differences that followed the reception of Moynihan's study of

Exhibit 3: THEORIES OF THE UNDERCLASS

	Purports to Explain the C ause, P erpetuation, M akeup or L ocation of the Underclass (with mechanism)	Implicates Space (as a Handicap in Labor ...)	Proposed Treatments
Historical Job Discrimination	C,M: economic handicap	No	Affirmative Action to redress imbalances
Historical Residential Discrimination	C,M,L: educational, cultural, & environmental handicap	Yes (Reproduction)	Affirmative marketing to redress imbalances
Present Job Discrimination	P,M: lack of opportunity, job history, & skill development; hopelessness	No	Affirmative Action, enforce fair hiring practices, education to alter attitudes
Present Residential Discrimination	P,M,L: entrapment, poor schools & institutions; limited locational options	Yes (Reproduction & Accessibility)	Fair housing laws, affirmative marketing, placement of subsidized units in suburbs
Post-Industrial Macro-Economic Restructuring	C,P: decline of mfg. & low skill job demand via labor-saving tech., job exporting, & switch to service sector; skills mismatch, unemployment	No	Federal economic policy, worker retraining, higher education
Micro-Spatial Manifestation of above; Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis	C,P,L: relative attractiveness & growth of suburbs relative to central city; difficulty of access to job growth areas	Yes (Accessibility)	Public assistance in job search & transportation to suburbs; improve competitiveness of central city
Filtering and the Geography of Affordable Housing	L: concentration of affordable housing in the city; historical wealth of suburban migrants and housing; city as magnet for migrants & poor	No	

	Purports to Explain the C ause, P erpetuation, M akeup or L ocation of the Underclass (with mechanism)	Implicates Space (as a Handicap in Labor ...)	Proposed Treatments
Suburban Exclusion	P,L: more pernicious, active version of above; intentional rather than historical geography; suburbanites consolidate gains & exclude the poor & heavy public service users	Yes (Reproduction & Accessibility)	Inclusionary zoning; reinterpreting local govt's rights to discriminate by income; placement of subsidized units in suburbs
(Inherited) Culture of Poverty	C,M,P: continuation of rural Southern culture of poverty inadequate skills & drive; dysfunctional values; family breakup & unstable upbringing	No	Eliminate poverty; promote family stability & well-being; education & training
Moral Degeneration	C,P: relaxation of strictures on non-conforming behavior; decline of religion & family	No	Reverse moral decline;
Abandonment by Middle Class; Increased Social Isolation	C,P,L: loss of role models, stabilizing institutions, & economic base from the central city	Yes (Reproduction)	Increase cross-class contact; attract middle class back to city; bus and/or move city-dwellers to the suburbs
Counterproductive Government Programs	C,P: reduces costs of not working & of dysfunctional behaviors; breaks families	No	Welfare reform; workfare; public jobs program; change incentive structure
Timing of Migration to the Central Cities	M: late migration of minorities explains their vulnerability to urban changes and disproportionate representation in the underclass	No	

The Negro Family (1965) was aided by a reassertion of the primacy of racial discrimination, even as that discrimination was being visibly reduced. And in modeling structural economic change and the spatial mismatch hypothesis, Ellwood notes that one of the main appeals of the model is that it "can generate low wages and skewed occupational distributions without resorting to models of discrimination or of the heterogeneity of workers" (1986, p.157).

William Julius Wilson's remains among the most convincing theories of the underclass, in large part because he frankly incorporates many of the competing explanations set forward, assesses them by whether they have more to do with the origins or the maintenance of the underclass, and plausibly ranks them by degrees of importance (see Wilson 1987, Ch. 7). He believes that migrations of young blacks to the low income neighborhoods of central cities created a group that was concentrated and vulnerable, but that macro-economic changes (especially the de-industrialization of the central cities) directly account for the unemployed and disconnected underclass. Any cultural or behavioral differences observed among the underclass are a product of their disadvantaged position in the economic structure rather than any holdover from an impoverished past or any recent, spontaneous degeneration. And whereas historical discrimination was certainly important in creating the relatively higher rates of poverty and marginality seen today among minorities, present discrimination can not shoulder the blame for the worsening situations of many poor and underclass persons. Wilson essentially downplays the role of space in creating and perpetuating the

underclass, maintaining instead that, ultimately, "Social mobility leads to geographic mobility" (p.158). Wilson also assigns great importance to the suburbanization of those blacks that do 'make it' and the consequent loss of stabilizing institutions and beneficial role models from the ghetto.

While many of the arguments in Exhibit 3 are powerful and appealing, research is still either lacking or equivocal. Do the abandonment of the underclass by the suburbanizing middle class and the need for geographic mobility to achieve economic gains square with the fact that over 60% of middle and upper income blacks still reside in central cities (see Turner & Page 1987; Hill 1986)? What does Westcott's (1982) finding--that the share of black males employed in blue collar occupations fell faster in the suburbs between 1973 and 1980 than in the central cities--say about simple assumptions concerning the impact of urban deindustrialization?

While it is not my purpose here to undertake a review of existing evidence for or against each argument or combination of arguments, such a review would be a useful and relatively easy next step, as much of the relevant research has not been directly related to the question of the underclass and housing mobility. As a further step, those interested in these questions should design specific research projects to put theories of the underclass to more rigorous and direct tests in specific cities. If, as is likely, several arguments prove important, an understanding of their relative importance will be necessary. Nationwide studies probably obscure more than they reveal, as do many studies that only differentiate between Census-defined central cities and suburbs. Ellwood's (1986) study of the power of the spatial mismatch hypothesis in explaining

black-white employment differentials used several different approaches to look at specific Chicago neighborhoods and is a good example of the type of research needed.

Spatial Mobility and the Underclass

Without having to pass judgment on specific arguments, it is still possible here to assess which of the explanations of the underclass involve space and might potentially be susceptible to policies designed to increase housing mobility. The most important spatial factors are those that act to perpetuate the existence of an underclass. While other spatial factors that may have built the preconditions for a vulnerable population or influenced its concentration or racial composition are important for explanation, they are less likely targets for efforts to remove the current constraints on the mobility of the underclass and to improve their present lot. Note that theories of the underclass have been put forward that either do not involve any important, active spatial roles or do not see them as promising targets for policy intervention. Sawhill's recent prescription for ameliorating persistent poverty and the underclass, for example, stresses the prevention of early childbearing, the reestablishment of parents' responsibility for their children, the enforcement of child support, increasing the incentive and opportunity to work, and investing in education (Sawhill 1988, Ch. 7).

Exhibit 3 suggests that four of the proposed explanations for the underclass might be susceptible to spatial mobility policies: continuing residential discrimination; the spatial mismatch created at the

metropolitan level by macro-economic restructuring; suburban exclusion; and the increased social isolation of the underclass brought on by the suburbanization of the black middle class. Indeed, together the treatments that have been proposed for these four problems essentially comprise a catalog of possible spatial mobility policies. Yet still, each offers a very different--neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily complementary--explanation, variously invoking race, economic geography, class, and sociology.

What these 'implications' of space share are the uncontestable facts that residential location confers certain advantages and disadvantages (school quality, neighborhood environment, property appreciation, accessibility, etc.), and that people face various constraints on their access to these advantages. Logically, policies to ameliorate the undesirable results of these facts can thus take two approaches:

1. Bring the relative advantage of residential location into greater balance by

   1.1 making the central city more attractive/advantageous; or

   1.2 changing the system which allows the suburbs to become and remain so much better places to live.

2. Improve the access of central city residents to advantages offered by the suburbs by

   2.1 make it easier for people to become suburban residents; or

   2.2 improving the access of central city residents to advantages available in the suburbs (better schooling and jobs, etc.).

The first approach (especially 1.1) corresponds roughly to what Hughes labels the Development Strategy, which "seeks to provide some

relief to impoverished black households by developing the economic opportunity of the ghetto through a variety of initiatives" (1987). The second approach (especially 2.1) corresponds to his Dispersal Strategy, which holds that opportunity and upward mobility are attainable only through the suburbanization of black residence.

Most policy treatments that have either been tried or seriously considered follow the second approach. Fair housing laws, affirmative marketing, inclusionary zoning, and the placement of subsidized housing in the suburbs are all attempts to make it easier for central city residents to move to the suburbs. Intra-jurisdictional busing, publicly assisted suburban job searches, and improved public transportation for reverse commuting are all attempts to improve the access of central city residents to advantages now available in the suburbs. These approaches essentially accept the existing spatial differences and attempt improvements by moving within that structure.

Strategies taking the first approach seem to be less favored at present. (Here I am drawing a distinction between programs that try to make the central city more attractive as a residential and economic location and those that simply minister to problems or disadvantaged populations that are concentrated in the central city.) Federal funding for urban programs has declined in the 1980s, as national priorities have shifted. Years of funding did not seem to have produced any visible turnaround in the urban 'crisis' of decline. Intentionally or not, the benefits of urban renewal accrued largely to suburban residents working in the downtown area, often at the expense of lower income city dwellers. Moreover, there are increasing arguments against trying to counteract the

'natural economic forces' (land costs, footloose industries, urban diseconomies, etc.) which spurred suburban growth and urban decline.

Strategies which, as I vaguely described above, try to change "the system which allows suburbs to become and remain so much better places to live," are inherently more radical, involving structural and perhaps judicial changes which go beyond new programs and funding levels. Intra-jurisdictional busing and the forced placement of subsidized housing in exclusive suburban communities, in addition to improving access to the suburbs, probably should be included in this category as well. Such changes challenge the ability of local jurisdictions to create relatively privileged and homogenous communities and to consolidate their gains by excluding all but desirable newcomers. Local tax bases can combine with residential patterns to produce separate, unequal "circuits" of education and public service funding across jurisdictions; these, as we have seen, affect the quality of life and the life chances of residents and their children. The history of early suburban growth illustrates this strategic distancing and consolidation (see Ashton 1984; Walker 1978). This elaborate structure of property rights, metropolitan fragmentation, and constitutionally guaranteed powers of local government is not altered without considerable resistance.

Still, most challenges to this structure have been based on the impermissibility of certain racially discriminatory outcomes; so far there is little precedent for overturning laws that effectively discriminate on the basis of income or class (eg. minimum lot size restrictions, zoning out apartments). And even if there were agreement among scholars and politicians that structural change was desirable--by

no means the case now, since the present system has led to popular and livable suburban communities for many Americans—opposition at the state and local government level, where most of the changes would have to be implemented, would be fierce. The underclass is a minority in a democratic society. And even when allied with the urban poor and working class (who may also be affected by this structural immobility) to constitute a majority in large cities, this coalition would likely be powerless to impose changes on non-central city jurisdictions or at the state level.

Reservations about a Spatial Mobility Strategy

Unfortunately, aside from the perhaps overriding importance of poorly understood and largely unmanageable macro-economic changes, it is these structural changes that I believe will be necessary to affect the circumstances of the underclass. While observers are correct in seeing the spatial dimensions of the problem, solutions that merely involve movement within the current geography are bound to fall short.

Besides exclusion or entrapment, there are some legitimate reasons that the poor are concentrated in central cities. Cities historically attracted low income, migrant groups. And the factors that drew these groups—available, inexpensive, filtered-down housing, support networks, concentrated and diverse economic opportunities—persist today, relative to other locales. Private developers have seldom built new, low income housing of their own accord. So the removal of exclusionary mechanisms in the suburbs, while probably desirable for its own sake and for the

long term, is unlikely either to open the gates to new housing that would benefit the underclass or to affect in the short term the suitability of the suburbs' existing stock to which the poor most often resort. In short, less money always means more restricted consumption possibilities. Stricter enforcement of anti-housing discrimination laws, while again desirable, is also unlikely to produce immediate benefits for the underclass, since a lessening of discrimination in the previous two decades has accompanied what is understood to be a growth of the underclass.

Suburban residence, simply conceived, is not the key to job accessibility and economic success. First, proximity, without both suitable skills and non-discriminatory hiring and pay practices, will not ensure employment success. Hughes' recent study (1987) of Cleveland, Detroit, and Philadelphia rejects dispersal (the suburbanization of black residences) as a means of increasing the economic status of employed black males. While Hughes agrees that there are strong intellectual and political arguments for dispersal, he believes that there has been a "confusion of dispersal as a means and as an end". Ellwood's empirical study of Chicago likewise finds that

> ...all of the attempts here to find a substantial impact of job accessibility on labor market outcomes lead to the same conclusion: accessibility matters only slightly....There is no evidence that any important part of the black-white differential in employment rates can be traced to differential residential proximity to jobs. Black and white teenagers with comparable measured characteristics do just as differently when they live next to each other as when they live far apart in areas with dramatic differences in job accessibility (1986, p.182).

Second, poor people living in the suburbs will still be immobile. In terms of transportation and accessibility, it is not relevant to

compare the urban poor to the suburban middle class, or commuting to reverse-commuting; rather the question is whether the poor would have greater accessibility living in the suburbs than in the city. Difficult as commuting from the central city to the suburbs may be, it is doubtful that commuting to and from a suburban job and residence would be any easier. Suburbs are still more dependent on the automobile than are cities, and have less extensive public transportation systems. We must be careful not to assume that job growth occuring in the suburbs would be more accessible to poor people living somewhere in the large suburban ring than to centrally located residents. If we are to build subsidized housing in suburban areas, we must make sure that it is actually accessible to sites of appropriate employment, either by close physical proximity or adequate public transit linkage, and that it is not likely to be stranded in the future by the unpredictable movements of a handful of increasingly footloose employers. Again, despite decline, cities are still concentrated economic and employment centers compared to the dispersed, though prospering, suburbs.

A prudent, experimental first step would be to pursue programs that facilitate suburban employment for central city residents, including assistance in job search and matching as well as commuting. Gauging the participation of employees and employers would serve to allay or confirm suspicions that a) the unemployed see these jobs as too low-paying or otherwise not worth their while, and b) that employers will not hire these workers (due to discrimination and/or skill deficit) and in fact have already declared their independence from them by opting for peripheral locations. This approach has the advantages of being less

expensive, less controversial, and less risky than new, suburban, subsidized housing construction; at the same time it provides experience which can be used to evaluate the likelihood of success of such construction.

The contention that an exodus of stabilizing, middle class, minority institutions and role models contributes to the growth of the underclass is at the same time appealing and troubling. The appeal stems from both a) the simultaneity of underclass growth and the emerging, black middle class presence in the suburbs; and b) the explanatory logic of a sociological link between non-mainstream behavior and the absence of strong mainstream institutions and role models (see Wilson 1987). Nonetheless, hard evidence supporting the argument is lacking, and there are intellectually troubling implications associated with citing it as an important cause of the underclass.

First of all, the abandonment argument implies that there should be a cross-class racial cohesiveness through which a group is expected to help 'its own'—a sort of black man's burden if you will. Second, the gradual up-and-out pattern has been the prevalent one throughout the history of American urban migration. Never before has the suburbanisation of the newly middle class been accused of creating an underclass of those left behind; neither has any other ethnic group been expected to take responsibility for those it 'abandons'. Third, it is arguable that those who are successful enough to move to nicer suburban communities are in fact good role models. Certainly by spearheading suburban migration streams they serve to demystify the perhaps

intimidating suburbs and chip away at barriers to movement. Finally, even if suburbanization of the middle class is creating a problem for those left behind, the flow is not something that society is able, or should want, to stop. The upward mobility and integration of minorities should be promoted, and policy responses to the underclass will have to look for different avenues.

On another note, the abandonment argument, if true, suggests that strategies that promote improved access to the suburbs will further detract from the economic base and stability of the central city environment, thus exacerbating the underclass problem. Removal of barriers to suburbanization will increase the exodus of those at the margin of being able to move, while probably not creating significant opportunities for the underclass. And unless full depopulation of the central city is intended, constructing low income housing in the suburbs may further weaken what economic base and community institutions do remain in the central city.

In short, accepting and responding within the current spatial differential can entail a tacit relinquishment of cities as continuing, viable places to live. Moreover, the underclass is likely to be among the last to respond, and their circumstances in the meantime are likely to be eroded further. Thus, even if dispersal is demonstrated to help those few at a time who can be enabled to relocate, it does nothing to help (and may actually hurt) the many who remain in the cities. Finally, a goal of suburbanization may be too superficial, overlooking some of the more important mechanisms at the root of the current situation. Is there demand for these workers? And what of Muth's position "that white

middle-class mobility is just too high to believe that any dispersal policy would be stable enough to yield any sustainable gains in black socioeconomic assimilation. Policy-makers can ensure the right of blacks to move in, but they cannot keep white from moving out" (see Hughes 1987).

What remains then is to bring the spatial differential of residential advantage into greater balance. But because of the objections noted earlier, this approach will need rethinking and must in any case involve more than the pouring of aid into central cities. A less direct and more comprehensive approach is likely to be more effective and intellectually defensible. Making central cities more attractive places to live (strategy 1.1) will involve changing the system which allows the suburbs to become and remain so much better places to live (strategy 1.2). While there are strong socioeconomic forces and incentives in operation, I contend that the present, harmful differential between central city and suburb is not wholly due to natural forces to which society must resign itself. European and Canadian central cities continue to be viable places.

The significance of location is largely man-made. The potential power or uses of space and separation are ultimately bestowed by a society, though not always intentionally or consciously. The current urban form and the tendencies towards the dispersal of metropolitan development are largely products of federal policy, the system of local governments and service provision, prejudices, consumption choices, the man-made transportation network (determining accessibility), and the

entire structure of incentives for the location decisions of households and businesses. Both hope and responsibility spring from this observation, since how space is and can be used is also subject to conscious change by a society.

The recent rise of development impact fees for new residential construction, for example, reflects the realization by growing counties that the costs facing developers and new residents may not embody the marginal costs of growth to the community. Communities are recognizing their power to affect location decisions and incentives in this way. On the other hand, if such fees posed hardships on the larger (say metropolitan) society, it may be in that society's best interest to reserve such power for higher levels of government.

Clearly there is room for a heightened understanding of the how society's current configuration of powers and incentives affect spatial and social outcomes, especially the underclass. Then, rather than simply responding to those outcomes, we may begin to see ways to alter pieces of the configuration to achieve socially desirable changes.

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